

Guest Column: Bringing degree completion within reach for more adults

By Mary Ellen Caro

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How much good can a college or university do if the education it provides is out of reach for students who need it most?

As the president of Philadelphia's only institution of higher education dedicated exclusively to serving adults, I believe this question is particularly important for the millions of Americans that have completed some postsecondary education but still have no degree or other credentials.

[The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#) estimates that approximately 36 million people from all 50 states are in this category, and named Pennsylvania among the top 10 states for the "some college, no degree" population. Nationally, these former students are nearing middle age, with a median age of 39.

In Philadelphia, the [Pew Charitable Trust](#) has indicated that the city's low percentage of adults with a college degree is often cited as a key factor contributing to its lackluster economic performance over the past several decades.

For most people, the best way to land a good job is through education and training. Most jobs that pay a living wage and offer the type of benefits needed to care for a family require candidates to possess some type of skill, specialized training or postsecondary credential.

The [Bureau of Labor Statistics forecasts](#) that employment in bachelor's-level occupations will grow by 10 percent from 2016 to 2026 — faster than the average projected for all occupations.

The [bureau also reports](#) that salaries are higher and unemployment is lower for people who possess a bachelor's degree compared to workers who do not.

To move the degree completion needle, where do we start?

It begins with understanding the pain points of adults who started a college education but were unable to finish. Today, these people are mostly working parents who cannot sacrifice their personal and professional responsibilities to go back to school like they did when they were recent high school graduates.

They need a new model that delivers affordability, flexibility and academic integrity. This is a model built on a network of collaborative partners, including community colleges, alternative course providers and other organizations, dedicated to leveraging diverse credit-earning options that are aligned with stackable, market-driven academic programs that meet the unique needs of adult students and employers.

This model "unbundles" higher education to maximize transfer credits and prior learning assessment. This lowers costs and increases flexibility, which brings the goal of finishing a bachelor's degree within reach for more and more adults.

It also brings a renewed energy to the assessment of college-level knowledge that has been acquired outside the college classroom. This includes skills, competencies and expertise gained through years of work, professional and military training and other experiences.

Robust prior learning assessment programs have the potential to provide value and cost savings to both | students and employers, especially organizations who have invested in high-quality training programs.

For many adult students, prior learning assessment can save time and money and validates the training they have completed and the expertise they have gained in their careers.

For employers, institutions that specialize in the assessment of prior learning can evaluate in-house training provided to employees and award credit for that training that can be applied directly to specific degree programs and certificates aligned with the workforce needs of the company.

At Peirce College, we are using this model to drive down degree completion costs, expand access and create more value for our students and partners.

This places opportunity within reach for more adults in our region, including veterans and the underserved, who possess the will to return to college to finish what they started and advance their education — and their careers.

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